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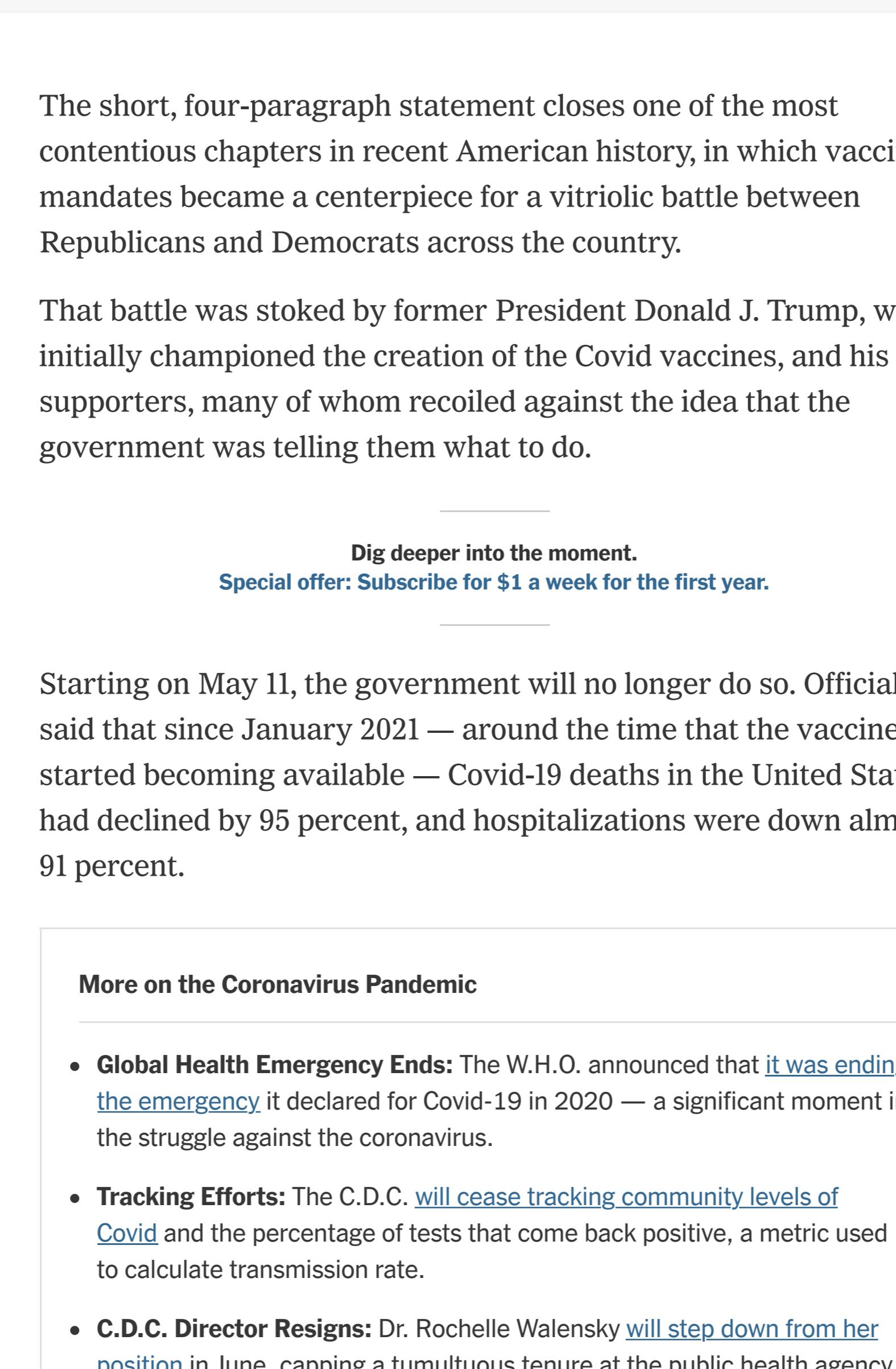
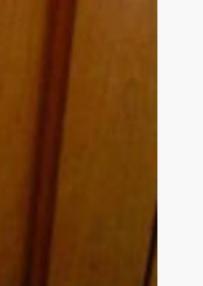
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# White House Will End Most Covid Vaccine Mandates

The requirements helped end the public health emergency. But they also prompted a politically charged debate.

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The vaccine requirements will be eliminated on May 11. Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times

By Michael D. Shear and Noah Weiland

May 1, 2023

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration will end most federal Covid-19 vaccine requirements next week, rolling back a vast assertion of government power that helped bring an end to the worst public health threat in 100 years but roiled American politics in the process.

The White House announced the shift in policy on Monday, roughly three years after the start of a pandemic that eventually prompted the United States and nations around the world to require hundreds of millions of people to be vaccinated against the fast-moving and rapidly changing coronavirus.

But on May 11, those requirements will end for federal workers, international travelers, contractors, Head Start employees and health care workers at many hospitals.

“While vaccination remains one of the most important tools in advancing the health and safety of employees and promoting the efficiency of workplaces,” the White House said, “we are now in a different phase of our response when these measures are no longer necessary.”



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The short, four-paragraph statement closes one of the most contentious chapters in recent American history, in which vaccine mandates became a centerpiece for a vitriolic battle between Republicans and Democrats across the country.

That battle was stoked by former President Donald J. Trump, who initially championed the creation of the Covid vaccines, and his supporters, many of whom recoiled against the idea that the government was telling them what to do.

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Starting on May 11, the government will no longer do so. Officials said that since January 2021 — around the time that the vaccines started becoming available — Covid-19 deaths in the United States had declined by 95 percent, and hospitalizations were down almost 91 percent.

### More on the Coronavirus Pandemic

- **Global Health Emergency Ends:** The W.H.O. announced that it was ending the emergency it declared for Covid-19 in 2020 — a significant moment in the struggle against the coronavirus.
- **Tracking Efforts:** The C.D.C. will cease tracking community levels of Covid and the percentage of tests that come back positive, a metric used to calculate transmission rate.
- **C.D.C. Director Resigns:** Dr. Rochelle Walensky will step down from her position in June, capping a tumultuous tenure at the public health agency as it struggled to rein in the pandemic.
- **2022 Deaths:** The National Center for Health Statistics reported that Covid was the fourth leading cause of death in the United States last year, dropping from third place in 2020 and 2021.

That mirrors the trend around the world, where deaths from the virus are at their lowest levels since the beginning of the pandemic, according to the White House.

Medical experts, many of whom were fierce advocates of government vaccine mandates throughout the pandemic, largely agree that the need for such requirements has diminished as the threat from the virus has faded.

Dr. Paul G. Auwaerter, the clinical director in the infectious diseases division at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, said the Biden administration’s move on Monday drew it closer to current international strategies to contend with the virus.

The vaccines still help in reducing the chances of hospitalization and death, he said, but are no longer effective at preventing transmission of the virus. The decision about whether to be vaccinated will once again be largely between a doctor and patient, not the government, Dr. Auwaerter said.

“People have developed their own sense of risk assessment and need for immunizations,” he said.

Other Covid vaccine mandates have already been relaxed by colleges, local and state governments, and private companies. But the end of federal vaccine requirements will have an immediate impact on tens of thousands of Americans, as well as foreigners who travel to the United States.

Among them is likely to be Novak Djokovic, the Serbian professional tennis player who is currently ranked No. 1 in the world in men’s singles but who has been banned from coming to play in the United States because he will not confirm that he is vaccinated.

The lifting of the vaccine requirement for international travelers will most likely mean Mr. Djokovic will be able to play in the U.S. Open, which is scheduled to take place in New York in August and September.

The vaccine requirements will be eliminated on the same day that the Biden administration ends the Covid-19 public health emergency, which was declared by the Trump administration on Jan. 31, 2020, shortly after the initial discovery of the respiratory disease in China.

On May 11, a separate set of Covid-19 policies will begin to unwind as well, marking an unofficial end to the most intense phase of the federal government’s pandemic response.

Americans with private health insurance and Medicare plans will no longer be eligible for eight free at-home coronavirus tests each month.

Medicare recipients might also face some cost-sharing for virus tests administered at health providers, while those with private plans might face the same for PCR tests. Some people with private plans may also pay for costs tied to out-of-network Covid-19 vaccinations.

Hospitals will also no longer receive higher Medicare payment rates for treating Covid patients. And the Department of Health and Human Services will no longer be able to require that labs report Covid-19 data.

But few things about the pandemic were as controversial as the federal government’s effort to slow the spread of the disease by forcing certain Americans to receive the vaccine.

As cases and deaths spiked across the country, so did the resistance to a vaccine, which many conservatives and supporters of Mr. Trump attacked as an affront to their personal freedoms.

Representative Thomas Massie, a Republican from Kentucky, who was “absolutely unconcerned” about the virus, compared the mandates to “Nazi experiments” and called them immoral and unethical. Mandates after he left office.

“I have to tell you, you can’t mandate it,” the former president said. “You can’t force it. And I don’t think it’s going to be necessary because this thing is going to eventually go away.”

Mr. Biden, by contrast, pushed forcefully for a federal vaccine mandate, saying in September 2021 that the reluctance of some Americans to be vaccinated was hampering the government’s efforts to eradicate the disease.

“We’ve been patient,” Mr. Biden said. “But our patience is wearing thin. And your refusal has cost all of us.”

But for all of the fierce debate that consumed American politics for years, the end of the administration’s vaccine mandate was delivered with little fanfare, and with none of the drama that surrounded its initial announcement.

Mr. Biden did not give a public address, choosing instead to rely on the short statement from his staff to defend both the initial decision to impose the requirements and the move to end them.

“Our Covid-19 vaccine requirements bolstered vaccination across the nation, and our broader vaccination campaign has saved millions of lives,” the White House’s statement said. “We have broadly accessible vaccines, tests and treatments to help us combat Covid-19.”

But, the statement added simply: “These measures are no longer necessary.”

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